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SUBJECT: GCOB, OPPOSITION BARBS ON CUBA REVEAL FOREIGN  
POLICY GULF

REF: NASSAU 867

Classified By: DCM Zuniga-Brown for reasons 1.4(a) and (d).

11. (C) Prime Minister Ingraham, in Santiago de Cuba for a CARICOM high-level meeting December 8, framed his government's basic continuation of the previous PLP government's Cuba policy as a matter of pragmatism, rather than conviction. In remarks to media widely reported in The Bahamas, the PM distanced his government from the PLP decision to elevate the consulate-general in Havana to an Embassy, yet spoke supportively of education and medical exchanges with Cuba and downplayed the failure to reverse course on any front. Two days before International Human Rights Day, notably, Ingraham did not make any statements of support for democracy in Cuba or say anything that could be construed as critical of the Castro regime.

12. (C) The FNM has named a new ambassador to Cuba, continued a longstanding teacher exchange and appears likely to renew a medical exchange agreement as well, despite a delay for review. Ingraham noted that his ambassador-designate, ex-Immigration Director Vernon Burrows, who accompanied him on his trip, was a veteran immigration official whose experience recommended him for the job in Havana. Illegal migration from Cuba remains a major challenge. He also noted the benefits of the Bahamian relationship with Cuba in medical and educational exchanges (reftel).

13. (C) Yet the PM derided the former government's policies toward Cuba as unnecessary and ad hoc, causing the PLP to hit back sharply in a statement December 9, calling the PM's comments "unfortunate, self-serving and ill-advised." The PLP said the PM's "unnecessary intervention" risked causing offense to a friendly neighbor, Cuba. The statement characterized the PLP stance toward Havana as a "strategic economic and political move". The PLP claimed the wisdom of their policy was vindicated by current expectations, widespread in The Bahamas, that the incoming Obama administration will make significant changes to U.S. policy on Cuba.

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COMMENT  
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14. (C) The PM's attempt to have his cake and eat it too on Cuba was less surprising than the PLP's justification of its "non-ideological" and "strategic" attitude. Coming soon after a similar spat over Venezuela's Petrocaribe, which the GCOB continues to oppose in the face of opposition criticism, the trading of barbs reveals a bigger difference in attitude toward the U.S., perhaps than toward either of the other two countries. Ingraham's remarks also confirm, however, that the FNM will not make any effort to promote human rights in Cuba going forward. Bahamians appear convinced that the Obama administration will make significant changes in U.S. policy toward Cuba and, though some are critical of the democratic deficit in Cuba, none in power see any advantage in criticizing the Castro regime during a time of transition in Washington.

SIEGEL